

prologue

The famed Magnificent Mile district of downtown Chicago looked like a bomb had hit it. And that was probably because, after a fashion, it *had*.

A bomb that wasn't a bomb, but was in fact something the people of the city never thought they would see. Yet these sorts of weird, scary, *supernatural abilities*, things right out of comic books and video games... they were something that, in the last fifty-three months at least, had started to become terrifyingly commonplace in everyday American society.

It was a bomb in *human* form. At least in theme and theory.

It – or rather, *she* – stood high above the chaos that had flooded out onto the streets from the buildings that lined it, the scuffed white toes of her Converse peeking out over the edge of the neon sign she had clambered up onto. Some eighty or so stories below, amidst the scattered blazing cars and shattered storefronts, families and friends panicked, screamed, sprinted, cowered, and hid. People who, only minutes before, had been gushing about the light snowfall that was adding a festive feel their seasonal holiday shopping, or rummaging through bags to show each other what deals they'd managed to score so far. People who were now running for their lives, or were frozen in total and utter fear. Or curiosity.

Or stupidity, thought the lone man who had been only minutes behind said human bomb on her way up to the roof of the building her mother worked in, as he peered over the ledge and saw a young man about his own age (mid- to late- twenties) standing prone in the middle of the intersection with his smartphone raised high in front of his face, aimed up at the tiny teenage girl who had been the sudden source of so much destruction.

The man didn't care. His priority wasn't clearing the streets of wankers and idiots who thought fifteen seconds of YouTube footage was worth risking their life for. His priority was the girl who had started it all.

The girl who now stood not fifteen feet from him atop the enormous, flashing red sign proclaiming something he hadn't bothered to read, which extended out over the street below; she gazed over the city, teetering on the ten-inch wide ledge in her simple gray skinny jeans and Panic! At The Disco hoodie, which gave her a deceptively harmless appearance. Her white-blond hair whipped about her face on the wind, shrouding her expression from his view. Which didn't make judging her current state of mind any easier. The man whose job it was to follow her eased himself up onto the concrete sill of the building, waiting until he was on roughly the same level as her before making his presence known.

"Hey there -!"

Because what better way was there than that to reach out to the sixteen-year-old kid he'd spent the last three weeks surveilling?

The blonde sophomore whipped around at the end of the sign, managing to keep her balance somehow as the wind the city was famous for blustered around them, pelting them angrily with tiny flakes of snow. Her dark mascara was smeared down her cheeks and her nose was red from crying. She was clutching a cheap Bic lighter in each of her small hands, which were both completely concealed beneath what appeared to be welding gloves.

That's... that's not a good thing.

"You..." Those tear-smudged eyes were huge and round, staring at the tall, bulky, blond man who had followed her up there with a mixture of surprise and fear. "You're the guy who's been stalking me..."

"Actually," the man shouted back over the whistle of the wind, his voice carrying the rather prominent, lazy drawl of what Americans would consider a Cockney accent, "I personally prefer to think of it as 'Guardian Angel-like behavior'."

"Are you a cop?"

The question didn't exactly catch him off-guard. It was usually one of the first he was asked upon confronting one of his targets. "I'm a... I'm a sort-of agent. But I don't work for the cops, or the government. I guess technically I work for the United Nations."

The blonde girl snorted. "Is that good news for me or bad news for me?"

"Well, see, thankfully for us both, it's good – I hope," the British man was saying as he dared to place one foot closer to the bolted sheath clamping the sign against the rooftop, the toe of his combat boot just nudging the steel. "I mean, if that news makes you kill us both, then I guess it's bad news... but if you're willing to trust me, Riley, then it's gonna be good news."

"My name's Cabe, okay?" he continued, after her eyes grew rounder at the realization that this strange man knew her name. "Agent Cabe Sparrow. And I'm with a Division of the U.N. called W.A.R.D. – our job is to protect Anomalies like you and make sure that they're safe, and that everyone else around them is safe, too."

"Is that why you've been following me?" Riley demanded, pivoting more fully on her perch to face this Cabe Sparrow head-on. "Because you think people aren't safe around me?"

Well, considering I just watched you breathe streams of fire down eighty storeys into the street... thought Cabe, before he shook it out of his head. Sometimes, when he was on the job out in the thick of it, it was difficult to remain clear-headed and unbiased, especially after witnessing so much senseless violence and carnage.

But it wasn't senseless, he reminded himself. This young girl was petrified. She was one of only an estimated two thousand in his jurisdiction of North America who, in the past four-and-a-half years, had begun developing these... abilities. Some could do more than others, which made some more frightening. Some caused more panic and alarm within society than others, whether it was the schools, the local P.D., or just society itself. Those were the scenarios when W.A.R.D. received a case file, and an agent like Cabe Sparrow was charged with keeping the situation... calm.

"No, Riley," replied Cabe, with sincerity in his voice. "I've been following you because we're worried you're not safe around people."

Like I said – helper, not stalker. I know you probably really don't want to trust me right now, you've not been able to trust your teachers or you friends..."

"Are you afraid of me?"

Whether it was her own natural defense system kicking into play, or a product of exposure to the Winter elements for too long, her words were frosted with a thin layer of ice. One hand extended ever so slightly, the thumb of her welding glove (which he noticed now she'd driven a screw or nail through in order to make striking the lighter easier) poised over the flint. He'd already witnessed with his own eyes what could possibly happen next if she didn't like his answer: she flicked, exhaled, and a torrent of fire and flame grilled his ass like a well-done ribeye.

He had to admit, despite his desire to put a stop to it, it was a fairly innovative way to weaponize the fact that one could breathe freakin' propane or something.

Sometimes science had to be laid aside for the short while it took to remove himself and his super-powered charge from the dangerous situation. The few seconds it took for him to doubt what he saw was the few seconds of distraction that would get him killed. Repudiation was suicide, as the W.A.R.D. agent who'd trained him years ago had once said.

"I don't... I don't think that's really a fair question."

Riley was impudent, refusing to back down. "Why?" she demanded.

"Because I don't know you at all. I haven't been given the chance."

The girl snorted, motioning with the lighter as if to remind him it was still in between the two of them. "You've been stalking me for three weeks, I'd say you know me pretty fucking well."

Cabe shook his head, the wind tossing his short, ash-blond spikes to one side as he squinted against it, remaining focused on his young charge at all times. The dizzying downward sight of brick and stone spiraling ground-ward toward smudges of color that were trees and cars and people was a little too much for his head, which was already spinning in loops. Heights had never been a friend of his. "Yeah, but that means I know you, it doesn't mean I know you. Get what I

mean?”

“No... not at all.” Riley shook her head, bending her free arm to wipe her eyes and nose on her sleeve. “By the way, Agent Cabe Sparrow... you look like you’re totally about to shit your pants.”

“I’m not gonna like to you, mate, I probably am.”

“You scared of heights?”

Cabe tilted his head in a so-so motion and pulled a face. “Not exactly? I just don’t particularly enjoy being suspended over them for any extended period of time.”

Somewhere, within the curtain of billowing platinum hair, his sharp eyes caught the way her lips curved just the tiniest fraction at the corners. “Look,” he said, smoothly and sympathetically, seizing would could become a rare opportunity to de-escalate the situation, “I’m not like you, Riley. I can’t do the incredible things you can do.”

“Incredible?” she spat. “I’m a freak! I got kicked outta school... my girlfriend dumped me ‘cuz I nearly suffocated her last time we made out! My mom called the cops on me! These guys in... in suits keep coming over and Mom talks to ‘em for hours and I know what they’re talking about...!”

“What are they talking about, Riley?” asked Cabe, without even a single hint of dubiety to his words. He wanted to do what quite possibly no other adult had done for her yet – listen to her.

The blonde sophomore student scoffed at him, peering down over the edge of the sign she stood on as it wavered ever so slightly with a strong gust. Cabe’s muscles coiled, ready to spring into action if needed with no more than a split second’s notice.

“They’re gonna take me away, and lock me up,” she said in a voice so quiet Cabe had a hard time hearing her over the wind and the din from below. “And I don’t care if you think I’m a crazy conspiracy theorist, because I know that’s what they do to people like me! People they’re scared of! They don’t, they don’t even think that... that maybe I don’t wanna hurt them...”

“And now you’re trapped and you feel like there’s no way out,” Cabe offered to finish for her, his low tenor soft with empathy.

“Oh, there’s a way out,” she replied darkly, and her line of vision dropped again to stare at the street below. “For me... and maybe some of them. All of the doctors who examined me told my mom my lungs are full of this, this... hexane- propane-compound-thing...? That apparently now I inhale oxygen, and exhale all this fucked up super-flammable gas, that my body can create it... so... so how much of an explosion d’you think I’d make if I hit the ground from this height...?”

So, that’s her exit strategy... Suicide, especially among some of the younger Anomalies he was assigned to, wasn’t an uncommon solution to this sort of a dilemma. And the method used for said suicide, especially when an individual had been especially hurt or betrayed or abandoned by society, was quite often specifically planned to leave more than just the one person dead. Bollocks, shit, and fuck the side of the bed I woke up on this morning...

“I’m really, really crap at science,” replied Cabe cautiously, “but I’m willing to bet ten bucks you’d make a pretty fucking big boom. I would guess six, maybe seven square blocks?”

Riley’s head lowered even further, her expression completely shrouded by the curtain of white-blond hair. “And they would all deserve it.”

“I know, Riley.” Unlike his charge, Cabe was still trying not to look down. “I know they would, because they’ve treated you like shit. And I know because I’ve helped dozens of people like you, and my Division at the U.N. has helped thousands, all over the world. It’s what we do. Because this world, Riley? It’s unfair. It’s a bitch. And whether it’s because you listen to music that isn’t on the radio, or because you like girls more than boys, or because you can breathe out a highly- flammable toxic gas... the world’s gonna try and shit on you. It’ll take whatever opportunity it can, and it’ll do whatever it takes to try to drag you down to its own crappy level.

“That’s why you gotta rise above it, Riley,” he continued, sensing that he may be starting to chip away at the walls and boundaries she had put up for her own protection, and get through to her. “That’s why you gotta rise above them, all of them, down there. There are people in this world who are chosen to make a difference, to face animosity and adversary and come out on top. People who are meant to do

something bigger... I don't think you're a freak, Riley. I think you're a young woman who's been shoved into a piss-arse situation that she's trying to navigate, that even someone her mom's age would have trouble navigating, and who could maybe do with the help of a team of allies who can make sure all those broken, overlooked, shadowy areas of the law can't get their teeth into you. I'm talking lawyers, meetings with senators, and judges..." The grooved rubber sole of his combat boot braved the first step out onto the neon sign. It shifted an inch or two under his weight and his stomach churned like butter, but he boldly extended his dominant hand to her regardless, palm-up, the invisible and metaphorical olive branch clutched right there between his outstretched fingers.

"Riley, please. Let us help you. Let me help you. And I promise you, you'll be safer in our hands than anywhere else in the world. I promise you."

Whenever Cabe was forced to confront one of the charges he had been assigned to for a case like this, there was always that moment – that peak in the conversation, like an apex of emotion – where his charge was offered a blunt and blatant choice. A choice which would, if they accepted it, grant them safety, sanctuary, legal representation, and a real shot at freedom in a world that was fast becoming a formidable and dangerous place for anyone with any skill or ability even slightly supernatural. A choice which could save their life.

Most of the time, they chose logic and reason over emotion, and he was able to bring them in for an interview and, if required, fully-funded medical treatment. Sometimes, he wasn't so lucky; those were the days he usually returned home with broken bones. During that moment, all sights and sounds and other sensual stimuli had a tendency to melt away into a backdrop of hazy white noise, rendering them both vulnerable and naked. It was a near impossible feat, convincing those who believed trusting others was fatal, to put their faith in you. It was a task as fragile as crystal; it couldn't be rushed, or forced, or mishandled. Every fraction of every second was an opportunity – for something to go right, or to go very, very wrong.

The silence lasted three seconds. Then four, then five, then six... Cabe wrestled against his inner phobias to stay by the edge as another wind kicked up, rustling his bomber jacket and jeans, which did little

to protect him against the biting chill of the air. But he wasn't abandoning her... not now.

After what seemed like an eternity of that same static nothingness, Riley raised her head to peer at him through her long bangs. Her eyes were brimming with tears again, her cheeks already wet. In that instant, his heart tore in two at the sight of someone so young faced with such a serious and possibly dangerous decision to make. Life was most definitely far from fair these days.

"They... they won't let me go..." she whimpered, again at a volume Cabe had to strain to hear, getting just a hair closer to her with his one foot out on top of the sign. "I'm a criminal, I... I'm a terrorist, I've killed people –"

"You're not a criminal or a terrorist, Riley," interrupted Cabe, determined not to lose the inch or two of ground he had managed to gain. His terminology was well-practiced and adapted from scripts he had trained with, to ensure the wrong messages or signals were never accidentally conveyed.

"At W.A.R.D., we... we would refer to you as an 'Assailant'. It's our own special terminology for a person, especially an Anomaly, who may have committed a violent crime or done something heinous when we don't know what specifically triggered them to act in that way. The 'Anomaly Panic Defense' clause work in both directions, you know."

"Not in this country."

"Yes, in this country," the blond man replied sternly, firmly, in a tone that allowed no room for protest. "The A.C.L.U. work for it. Democratic independent politicians work for it. We work for it, at W.A.R.D., and we aren't going to turn you over to any justice system we believe is biased or partisan, or in any way unfit to try you without total equality. You'll be a witness of the Security Council of the United Nations... now that's something cool to tell your roommates when you go to college."

There was hope – a spark of it, just one, and it was tiny but it was there, right at the back of her eyes as if it were too scared to show itself just yet.

“You really think...” she mumbled, “... that I could still go to college one day...?”

Cabe straightened up a bit. “I will personally write your recommendation letter myself. And it’ll have an official United Nations stamp on it. But the only way I can do that, Riley, is if you stop this... and come with me. Calmly, quietly, and without any restraints. All right...?”

A single heartbeat passed between them before Riley inclined her head in a slow nod, and Cabe’s heart finally removed itself from where it was wedged nervously down his colon. “O-okay...” she barely whispered, and she took the two careful steps to bring her closer to the man on the rooftop, gingerly passing him the first Bic lighter as he reached for it.

“Atta girl. See?” Cabe took the lighter in his hand, sliding it into his jeans pocket without losing her gaze. “Super cool, super chill, super easy. And I kinda sound like an episode of Sherlock, so it can’t be that bad, right?”

Through the tears, she gave a tiny hiccup of a laugh. God, she was so young, too young to be dealing with this shit, Cabe told himself again. The targets and wards he was usually assigned to were at least adults in their own right, out of school and already thrust into the real world. There was nothing more heart-shredding than having to take in a child or teenager who should be rocking out alone at the back of the bus with their headphones on and their beats turned way up, or scraping their knees on the asphalt of the playground, instead of possibly facing a shoot-to-kill scenario with the local police department, hundreds of feet above the city.

“Cool,” urged Cabe, stretching out his arm again for the second lighter. “All right, Riley, c’mon. Let’s get you down from here, ‘kay? My partner for this case ain’t my usual partner, it’s this guy who used to live local here; he was sent with me ‘cuz he knows Chicago really well. Anyway, he told me about this Lou Mal... something’s? Apparently they do the best deep-dish pizzas in the country. And I bet if I tell him we’re both fucking famished, we can totally grab takeout on the way back.”

“Back where?” Riley was asking as she nervously, almost reluctantly,

held out the second Bic for him to take. Unfortunately, he never got the chance to, and she never got her answer.

“CHICAGO POLICE!”

The unholy roar of an announcement behind him heralded the arrival of the exact people Cabe had been trying to rush out of there to avoid. Any time the local police department got involved, it added a whole extra thousand feet of red tape that had to be woven, navigated, and evaded. And red tape had never been Cabe Sparrow’s forté.

Whipping around on the spot, Cabe spotted the bulk of them immediately. Four armed officers, two with assault rifles, had assembled themselves strategically to the east of the rooftop exit. The waist-high concrete barricade that split the roof into two sections was one of their only options for cover, and so they were all crouched behind it; a fifth officer was just inside the heavy metal door, his pistol jutting out around the side of it to point at them, and a sixth and seventh had established themselves behind the barricade on the west side of the door.

Bloody... fuck.

“CALMLY AND SLOWLY LAY DOWN ANY WEAPONS YOU HAVE,” one of them was bellowing into a megaphone to be heard over the rush of the wind. “SUBDUE ANY ANOMALY ABILITIES YOU CAN PERFORM, AND GET FACEDOWN ON THE GROUND!”

“It’s cool, guys, I got this!” the British man yelled back – as if, through some miracle of the universe itself, the seven armed officers would welcome that as a totally acceptable

Shit, shit, shit...

and legitimate argument, and leave the two of them to sort out their fire-breathing, city-destroying quarrels on their own. “Seriously, everything’s cool, we’re both unarmed, and we’re gonna head home now... nothing to see here... just got a little over-excited, that’s all...”

They wouldn’t – but hell, at this point, anything was worth a try.

“THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING –”

Riley was backing up, slow and careful, toward the end of the neon

sign. He couldn't see her, but he felt the way the metal swayed gently with the movement. Cabe deliberately shifted his body as much as he dared to while he was standing over the city street, using his body to block as many of their crosshairs from being able to pin her down as possible. He did not want them getting a clear shot at her, not even for a second.

For fuck's sake...!

"All right, seriously, listen – I know this sounds crazy," Cabe was yelling back, both of his hands empty and raised submissively at his sides, "but I'm an intergovernmental agent with the United Nations, charged with this girl's –"

"ON THE GROUND, OR WE WILL SHOOT TO KILL!"

Shoot to kill!? panicked Cabe inwardly, though a small part of him wasn't surprised. Cops were starting to lose their nerve more and more, and citizens were rising from silence to back them up – and in some respects, Cabe didn't blame them. Dealing with seemingly ordinary human beings who could breathe flammable gases or turn completely invisible or even scale walls and ceilings as if gravity itself didn't exist (just some of the examples Cabe had personally had the pleasure of being assigned to) was a damn good reason for being a little more trigger-happy on the streets. While cops being killed by Anomalies wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence, every few weeks a news story would break. It had become a reality of the job that police departments and other federal and state service workers all across America lived in fear of these days.

Or at least, believed they had to fear. Perception was a powerful weapon.

He couldn't permit his mental distraction to last too long, because every second right then was precious. Every second could mean the difference between life and death for him, the people on the ground, the police on the roof... and Riley herself.

But there was another reason he couldn't take his time responding. And that was because Riley had already retreated to the very end of her little ledge and was now cowering there, eyes wide, both gloved hands clutching the Bic lighter to the chest appliqué of her hoodie as

she stared at the half- dozen or so weapons trained on her with round, fearful eyes.

“They’re... they’re gonna kill me...”

“No, they’re not –”

“I can’t do this anymore...”

“NO!”

It was too late. Both Cabe and the cop with the megaphone screamed out in protest as the tiny teenage girl gave her would-be savior one last frantic look before... she was gone.

Just like that.

NO!

Cabe wasn’t sure exactly where his brain was at that particular moment in time, but when hindsight finally came around, if he survived this encounter, he would have to guess that it wasn’t in his head – or at least that his body had just flat-out stopped listening to it at this point. Because not even a heartbeat after Riley had teetered herself backward off the edge of the building to commit herself to a fate under her own control, Cabe’s boots were clanging over the neon sign with the one, two, three, four bounding steps it took him to reach the very limit of its span over the Magnificent Mile –

The scream of the air as it surged by was deafening. Wind and snow pelted his bare face like the blades of a billion tiny knives thrust up at him from below. His arms were flung violently back against his sides, bruising both his ribs and his elbows, as the natural G-force assisted him in adopting a much more aerodynamic pose, so that he could swiftly and effectively close the distance between himself and his target.

And then, he was falling.

ShitshitshitshitSHIT...!

If someone had told him he would be in this position thirty minutes ago, plummeting at terminal velocity toward the streets of Chicago’s busiest shopping district, he would’ve laughed it off as an attempt to get under his skin – which was reasonable, considering most other

operatives at W.A.R.D. knew about his severe phobia of heights. Thirty minutes ago, he'd been happily stuffing his face with questionable meat at a donair shop several blocks from his hotel room in the Loop district. It had been three days since Riley's mother had locked her in her room after she 'just couldn't take anymore', and so Cabe had taken the opportunity to grab a bite to eat while his partner had been on the phone to their supervisor back in Seattle. The order of business? Riley's three-day bedroom imprisonment had no doubt been a detriment to her mental stability, and approaching her and her mother in an official capacity was becoming more and more urgent. Once they officially made contact with the family, they could offer support, services, and advice to help them deal with Riley's... change.

Sadly, they wouldn't receive the opportunity to reach out before all hell broke loose. Shortly into his meal that evening, the text from Cabe's temporary partner for the case, Agent Haustead, had sent his phone buzzing across the table. Riley had popped her bedroom window out of its frame, stolen her mother's car, and was heading (according to the tracker they'd planted on it) for downtown Chicago.

Despite dashing down here direct from the donair joint, mid-mouthful, Cabe was still (as always, when he was working a case) in possession of a great deal of the safety equipment he was often required to keep on his person when dealing with an Anomaly whose abilities and emotional state put them in a situation this... precarious. His gun, concealed beneath his jacket in its holster, was one item that seldom left his personage on the job, along with mace in his pocket, a tactical knife sheathed in his boot, and a pair of standard-issue handcuffs clipped to the back of his belt. He was also wearing his W.A.R.D. communications earpiece, which meant he was more than able to hear his temporary partner for this case screaming wildly at him as he fell. Agent Haustead was down on street-level, which had been the prime spot to cover Cabe's back, and was demanding in a frantic voice to know what the hell Cabe thought he was doing!?

Haustead's position had been tactical, lest things go horribly, horrendously wrong and he need to take Riley out before more damage was done. That being said, his young British partner deciding to swan-dive right after her may have thrown a wrench into Haustead's plan to detonate the pseudo-bomb before she hit the

ground, considering Cabe had quite literally thrown himself right into the blast radius instead of under some form of cover.

But Cabe's willpower, his tenacity, was unshakable. He had been so, so close... and now, regardless of his intense and sometimes even crippling acrophobia, the knowledge that he had just thrown himself headfirst off of a building in downtown Chicago meant nothing to Agent Sparrow. Nothing, nada, zilch, zip, zero. The only thing he was focused on, the only concern on his mind at that moment in time, was the safety of Riley, and the safety of every single person within the immediate ten-block vicinity.

This was a bomb he would not allow to detonate, under any circumstances.

C'mon... C'MON...!

One fist was clenched tightly around the chunky, rubber handle of the sturdy metal gadget in his jacket pocket – something he'd been requested by his supervisor to carry on him, at least whenever it was functional, ever since that time he was roundhouse kicked off of the top of the Empire State Building... which was a fantastic story, when he actually had the time to tell it and wasn't sailing gracefully to his death. The other, his non-dominant arm, was straining, fighting with as much strength as it could to spread itself wide like a wing, just as he came down on top of a flailing, shell-shocked Riley. Regardless of whether or not one deliberately meant to throw themselves into a thousand-foot dive, without proper training and without knowing what the force of all those Gs actually felt like, it was likely to render them dazed and breathless for the majority of the drop.

Halfway, we gotta be at least halfway down...

The strong muscles of the agent's outstretched arm curled and tightened around Riley's waist, yanking her in close to the cushion of his own body and immediately spreading his legs and flattening himself out as best he could to slow their descent. A loud grunt ground itself painfully from the very hollow of his chest as he struggled against the pressure, struggling to retain control over his own limbs as the wind fought back against him.

Every single movement, every single breath was a battle he couldn't win but couldn't afford to lose.

Everything seemed to happen in the same blurry, frantic, jet-propelled second. Cabe twisted himself over, one arm dragging Riley's body on top of his own to shield her from the powerful wind resistance as well as – eventually – impact. His other hand was still in his pocket, firmly wrapped around Agent Sparrow's own pre-planned exit strategy: a piece of tech developed in-house at the North American branch of W.A.R.D. which, if you were the type to judge a book by its cover, seemed to be nothing more than a bulky, oversized rope climbing ascender, with a soft rubber grip and a tightly-spun reel of cable jutting out at one side.

Growling with the effort, Cabe wrenched it from his pocket and thrust it out over the top of Riley's body, aiming it as best he could at the building that was rushing past not twenty feet from his outstretched legs.

He honestly couldn't remember another time when he'd been this grateful to have remembered a specific piece of gear.

C'mon, Sparrow, make the shot, make the –

He squeezed the trigger, clamping it down hard within the handle itself. A length of steel cable burst from the top of the pseudo-ascender with the force and speed of a bullet; the tiny grappling hook at the end punctured the wall of the building at the twenty-fourth floor, a solid nine or ten storeys above them, piercing the brick as if it were butter and anchoring itself firmly in place.

“HOLD YOUR BREATH!” he screamed, though at this point, he wondered if Riley were even conscious anymore, or if she could even hear him if she was. Bracing himself for the sudden jarring stop, Cabe spun their bodies around on the cable, so that he was between his ward and the solid, brick wall which was rushing up on one side to meet them.

Concrete smashed into the tense muscles of his back. In the exact same instance, the taut wire snapped tight as gravity fought it for ownership of its two-person burden, wrenching his left arm so sharply against the socket that it took him until he noticed his fist was still clenched around the handle to realize his arm hadn't actually been dislocated. Winded, choking for air, he only allowed his body to bounce once against the building before using one strained, aching

leg to spin himself and his ward as they dangled some four- hundred feet above the ground.

Shit, shit, shit – please don't fucking explo –

Cabe was right – Riley was unconscious, which, in a way, made his job of removing her from this epically awful scenario in one piece and relocating her to a W.A.R.D. safe-house much easier. His much larger, stronger body easily covered hers like an enormous flesh-and-bone blanket, sheltering her from both sight and gunfire from the rooftop above as he nestled her securely between his chest and thighs, and the brick wall of the skyscraper.

And then, hanging there by his own brute strength and willpower alone, suspended fourteen storeys above one of downtown Chicago's busiest holiday districts... Cabe Sparrow began to release the trigger in short, controlled bursts, abseiling his way hurriedly toward the sidewalk.

Where he knew, without even looking down, that his team would be waiting for him. For a swift, pain-free extraction from not only the crowds that had gathered to watch the dramatic display, but the local law enforcement who would no doubt be on their tail the second his boots touched asphalt.

Sometimes, working for a security division that wasn't supposed to exist – an anti-terrorism unit that one in maybe every five million people in North America were cleared and contracted to even have the tiniest sliver of knowledge about – could be a real bitch.

Especially when it came to making a clean getaway from an exceedingly public display of criminal activity by one of the very Anomalies they were charged with protecting.

Which was why, when it came to moments like this, after he had pulled off a crazy, reckless, and quite possibly suicidal stunt in order to save the lives of what was possibly hundreds of people in a busy American downtown core... there was no one he would rather have his back than his brothers and sisters, his family, at the World Anomaly Reconnaissance Division.

You're gonna be fine, Riley, I swear on my life. I made you a promise.

You're gonna be abso-fucking-lutely fine...